



## Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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*Lord's Day 33* - August 17, 2008

- 88 **Q.** *What is involved in genuine repentance or conversion?*  
**A.** Two things: the dying-away of the old self, and the coming-to-life of the new.
- 89 **Q.** *What is the dying-away of the old self?*  
**A.** It is to be genuinely sorry for sin, to hate it more and more, and to run away from it.
- 90 **Q.** *What is the coming-to-life of the new self?*  
**A.** It is wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a delight to do every kind of good as God wants us to.
- 91 **Q.** *What do we do that is good?*  
**A.** Only that which arises out of true faith, conforms to God's law, and is done for his glory; and not that which is based on what we think is right or on established human tradition.

Conversion is essential to the gospel. The world needs to learn and we frequently need to be reminded that Christianity is not about refurbishing a few morals here, or helping you find your own unique spiritual journey there, or simply trying to get you to agree to a few theological statements. We need to be converted.

The Bible talks about conversion in many different ways. Conversion means turning from vain things to serve the living God (Acts 14:15). It means repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21). Conversion is described as being born again (John 3, 1 Peter 1), as being resurrected with Christ into a new life (Rom. 6:3-4), as being a new creation (James 1:18), as regeneration (Titus 3:5), as putting off old clothes and putting on new clothes (Col. 3:9-10). Conversion means a change of ownership, from slaves of sin to slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:17-18) and a change of spiritual status from death to life (John 5:24), and a change from darkness to light (1 Peter 2:9).

The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the change in conversion by pointing to two realities that happen in genuine repentance: the dying away of the old self

(mortification) and the coming to life of the new (vivification) (Q/A 88).

Dying to our old self entails three things. First, we are sorry for our sin. We see the foolishness of our ways and regret our choices.

Second, we hate our sin more and more. This is the harder of the first two steps. It is one thing to feel bad following the repercussions for some action. It is another thing to actually hate our sin and hate it more each day - not just because of the bad consequences it brings us but because of its offensiveness before God (Psalm 51:4). It's not enough to grit our teeth and do the "right thing" because we fear the repercussions of doing otherwise. We must see the vileness of sin and detest it.

Third, we run away from our sin. This is certainly the hardest part of true repentance, at least for me. Too often, we think that regretting a past mistake or saying we're sorry for some offense is all that repentance requires. But true repentance involves a change, putting our old ways behind us and walking in a different direction (2 Cor. 7:10).

I've spent many hours in my life wishing I could undo my embarrassing mistakes. I'm also pretty good at feeling miserable about my sin. I do think that most of the time I hate the sin that still dwells in me. I wish it wasn't there. I wish it wasn't me. What's much more challenging, however, is to actually change. Too often I am content to bewail my sin and have a good cry (usually metaphorical) before the Lord. But if I don't get off the ground and turn away from my sin, my tears are worthless. We are frequently content with mere talk - talk about how sorry we are, talk about how rotten we are, talk about how bad our sins are. This is all well and good, but the last time I checked we are called to "put to death the deeds of the body" not to merely complain about them (Rom. 8:12-13). We have not really repented if we are only stirred, but not changed.

The second aspect of true repentance or conversion is the coming to life of the new self. Notice that the dying away of the old self involved things like sorrow and hatred, while coming to life of the new self is described with words like joy and delight. Conversion is not simply a new way of living—though it leads to that. Conversion is a new way of thinking and feeling. It means we behold Christ in a new way, so that he looks clear where he had been confusing, brilliant where he had been bland, and supremely glorious where he had been just another regular, slightly above average guy.

Having our eyes opened to Christ's divine and supernatural lights means more than just a twinge of conscience or being moved with pity at Jesus' suffering. As Jonathan Edwards says, true converting grace imparts "a real sense of the excellency of God, and Jesus Christ, and of the work of redemption, and the ways and works of God revealed in the gospel." More than anyone else in recent memory, John Piper has helped Christians see the implications of the truth of Q/A 90. Being a Christian is more than fulfilling the duty of obedience. It must also involve glorious delight. Edwards again: "There is a twofold understanding or knowledge of good, that God has made the mind capable of. The first, that which is merely speculative or notional: as when a person only speculatively judges, that anything is, by the agreement of mankind, is called good or excellent...And the other is that which consists in the sense of the heart: as when there is sense of the beauty, amiableness, or sweetness of a thing; so that the heart is sensible of pleasure and delight in the

presence of the idea of it." When the Spirit of God brings us to life in Christ he operates on the mind, the will, *and* the affections. We not only think differently and act differently we also feel differently, so that we can truly say "I've tasted and seen that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8).

In short, conversion brings newness. New life. New direction. New inclination. New affections. The old has gone and the new has come. In conversion, the Spirit of God gives us a new awareness of sin, a new interest in the word of God, a new passion for holiness, a new desire for prayer, and a new sense of the majesty of God.

Lord's Day 33 concludes by looking at our new desire to do what God wants us to do. We obey not because we are slaves bound to our master's will, but because we have been set free and are now at liberty to do what we ought. At times, people may be able to be scared into temporary law keeping. But true conversion goes deeper and affects the heart, making us happy to walk in God's ways and do what is good.

Q/A 91 explains what constitutes "good" in God's eyes. For most people, good deeds are simply those that help people or the world in some way. So we figure we have no shortage of good deeds - after all, we recycle, build houses with Habitat, give to the United Way, and take our kids on fun vacations. But God's standard is higher and deeper. Good deeds are only those that (1) arise out of true faith (John 15:5; Heb. 11:6), (2) conform to God's law (1 Sam. 15:22; Eph. 2:10), and (3) are done for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). This doesn't mean we can't be thankful for the morality and kindness we see in non-Christians (see Lord's Day 3). Certainly, most people do nice things for others. But truly good deeds must do more than help people and spring from more than good intentions. Truly good deeds are done in God's strength through faith in Christ, conform to God's revealed will, and aim to make much of God and not us or the ones we serve.

The word of God must be our standard of goodness, not nice thoughts, or pleasant smiles, or the usefulness of charity. We can be thankful for kindness instead of meanness, but true goodness goes deeper into the heart and higher up to God than mere moralism.

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